Delaware Diary

Hidden in the Soil 5/4/05 CP

by

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The hopes of David de Vries were crushed shortly after he reached Cape Henlopen. The Dutch entrepreneur had been instrumental in establishing a settlement near the mouth of the Lewes Creek. In 1631, the first colonists arrived with high hopes that coastal waters and the Delaware fields could be turned into a productive colony. When de Vries reached Delaware Bay (which the Dutch called, "South Bay"), he reported: "Sailed into the south bay and saw immediately a whale near the ship. That this would be royal work—the whales so numerous—and the land so fine for cultivation."

While de Vries remained in Holland, the first Dutch colonists were dispatched to Delaware, where they erected a small stockade that overlooked Lewes Creek. The new settlement was dubbed "Zwaanendael;" and the colonists settled down for their first winter in the New World.

In Holland, De Vries continued to have high hopes for the colony, but he received a disturbing report that the colony had come to an untimely end. The Dutch entrepreneur recalled in his memoirs: "Before sailing out of Texel, we understood that our little fort had been destroyed by the Indians, the people killed two and thirty men who were outside working the land." A few months later, de Vries sailed into Delaware Bay; and as he entered Lewes Creek, the Dutch entrepreneur spotted the charred remains of Zwaanendael's timbered fort. After he went ashore, de Vries found: "…lying here and there the skulls and bones of our people and the heads of the horses and cows which they

had brought with them." A misunderstanding over a sign had escalated into a surprise attack by the Native Americans. All of the Dutch settlers had been killed, and the fort and other buildings had been burned. The first European attempt to settle the Cape Henlopen region had come to a tragic end.

After the destruction of the colony, grasses, shrubs and trees soon reclaimed the land of the Zwaanendael settlement. A few years later, European settlers returned to the Cape Henlopen area, where they established Lewes near the site of the old Dutch settlement. A diagram of the Zwaanendael stockade gave a few clues to the site of the luckless colony; but the exact location of the original Dutch settlement was forgotten.

In 1954, three men journeyed down Pilottown Road to the granite monument dedicated to the memory of the Zwaanendael settlement that had been erected in the early 20th century. Armed with shovels, the men began to dig a trench that began near the curbing by the monument and ran northeastward toward Lewes Creek. The topsoil was stripped away to expose the yellow subsoil; but two feet from the curb, at a depth of 15 inches, the men uncovered three rectangular patches of dark soil. After their findings were duly recorded, the excited men filled in the trench that they had dug.

The tantalizing dark patches were postmolds or postholes, words that archaeologists use more or less interchangeably. Posthole is the cavity created when a hole is dug; and postmold is the filling of that cavity by a post and the backfill used to keep the timber in place. Over time, the wood decays and leaves a patch of earth that differs in color and texture from the surrounding soil. The men who dug the trench near the de Vries monument were members of the Sussex Society of Archeology and History;

and they believed that the postmold patches that they had uncovered were valuable clues to the location of the Zwaanendael stockade.

Archaeology is slow and methodical work; and the members of the Sussex society took a decade before Chesleigh A. Bonine, Warren Calloway Paul Porter and Marion Tull returned to the field near the de Vries monument. On May 9 and 10, 1964, these men uncovered additional postmolds, which were generally square or rectangular. In contrast, holes dug by farmers to set fence posts are usually round or oval. The shape of the postmolds reflected the type of digging tool used, such as the square-edged shovels or hoes found in other early colonial sites.

When the postmolds were mapped, they formed a large square with sides that were 235 feet long. Two corners of the square were oriented on a north-south axis. The de Vries monument sat on the northern corner and it could not be excavated; but at the southern corner, the archaeologists uncovered a pattern of postmolds that matched a bastion indicated on the map drawn by de Vries over three centuries earlier. In addition, the archaeologists found fragments of charcoal in the sub-soil near the southern collection of postmolds.

These discoveries convinced the members of the Sussex Society of Archeology that they had uncovered the postholes that had once held the timbers of the Zwaanendael stockade. In the its journal, ***The Archeolog***, the C. A. Bonine announced: “The postmold pattern found in the 1964 investigation clearly indicates the south bastion of the palisade as drawn by de Vries. No longer can there by any doubt about the location of this early colonial fort.”

The careful work of the Sussex Society of Archeology had pinpointed the exact site of the Zwaanendael settlement. The members of the society had discovered the remains of the decayed logs that the Dutch colonists used to construct the palisade that overlooked Lewes Creek. The de Vries monument on Pilottown Road rests on the northern bastion of that fort; and it provides an excellent view of the surrounding area where de Vries had discovered: “the whales so numerous—and the land so fine for cultivation.”